

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 491

IR 013 013

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TITLE Children's Television News as Political Communication.
PUB DATE Jul 86
NOTE 49p.; Paper presented at the International Television Studies Conference (London, England, July 10-12, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Analysis; *Childrens Television; *Concept Formation; Content Analysis; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Foreign Countries; Interviews; News Reporting; *Political Attitudes; *Political Socialization; *Programing (Broadcast); *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Great Britain

ABSTRACT

This document presents the results of a two-year study of a British Broadcasting Company children's news program which examined the goals and routines of the programmers, the program content, and audience response. Observations were made of program routines, the content was analyzed, and responses to the programs were obtained during informal, unstructured interviews with small groups of children 8 to 11 years old at 15 London schools. As a control, 10 families were interviewed at home and, at one school, mothers and children were interviewed together for part of the session. The study focused on two specific news events, the 1981 riots in Britain and the 1982 Falklands conflict. Both events were considered to increase children's interest in the news and to be important in children's political concept formation. An attempt was made to make the newscasts interesting through use of visuals and, at the same time, to present the news in a manner that would allay fear and/or imitation of the violence shown. While the program met its own aims of programming, the findings indicated that the news bulletin, like others of its kind, was primarily a form of television entertainment for its viewers rather than a source of political socialization. (21 references) (CGD)

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Carole Bourne

Children's Television News as Political Communication

Paper Presented to the 1986 International Television
Studies Conference

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This paper will outline a study of the BBC1 children's television news programme, John Craven's Newsround, carried out from November 1980 to November 1982, considering the goals and routines of the programme makers, content, and the response of the audience.

The study was premised on the contention that an examination of children's response to television is not merely a matter of observing behaviour patterns or assessing how much information is gathered from television. To quote McLeod and Reeves,

"There are abundant number of processes and concepts that have been suggested as modifying or interpreting media exposure to effects relationship ... For the most part the most interesting communications theory results from the unravelling of these conditions and interactive relationships, not from the simple assertions that the media set public agendas or that children learn from television." (1)

Important to these "conditions and interactive relations" were the way aspects of audience reception, including family viewing routines, preferences and peer group discussion related to the 'political' attitudes and experiences children were absorbing from other sources, including family, gender, school, peer group and local community, within the context of national and international events. In view of the many interlocking sources of news, Newsround was not examined for its individual contribution

to children's political awareness. Moreover, it was recognised that news viewing was itself only part of general viewing patterns, during which other programmes also contributed to political awareness and general political issues were often treated in such programmes in broader and less formal terms, in the manner described by Schlesinger, Murdoch and Elliot as "open", as opposed to "closed", treatment of issues. (2)

The complexity of the process of encoding and decoding news suggested that close scrutiny of all stages of communication over a limited period might reveal important features: the findings of this study of children and children's television news were thus essentially historically specific rather than general. Two sets of events during the two year period, the 1981 riots and the Falklands conflict of 1982, not only received heavy news coverage but caused the makers of children's news to question their values and restate their aims and methods, this problematic coverage thus helping to define assumptions governing 'normal' broadcasting. Both sets of events also increased children's interest in the news, and might therefore be taken as examples of what Olive Stevens has described as the "intensified political campaigning", important in political concept formation. (3)

The riots of July 1981 were particularly useful to the study in that they raised the related issues of media

violence, and children and social control. Furthermore, many of the children interviewed at the time had seen evidence of the riots for themselves and this modified information gained from television news. The comments of these children in areas of London not affected by rioting were, conversely, more dependent on media coverage, and the riots thus provided evidence of differences in audience response. As a background to analysis of the riots, the major findings in each of the three areas studied, programme organisation, content and audience response will be outlined below.

I Programme Goals and Organisation

The constraints limiting and shaping the bulletin were obtained from comments made outside the BBC by those concerned, including parents, teachers and researchers, comments and guidelines inside the BBC, observation of programme routines and a number of interviews with those responsible for the bulletin.

1) News Values

Obviously, the most important internal constraints involved the values and routines connected with news journalism in general and television news in particular:

these concerned time, source of items and general working methods. John Craven himself, and a number of permanent and temporary members of the Newsround staff had experience of news journalism before coming to work on the programme. The programme also relied heavily on the resources of the BBC Newsroom. Newsround had a small staff of about nine, although the precise number varied as staff were seconded to the programme or moved to other programmes for short periods. It had no camera crew and many 'hard news' items were provided by reporters and correspondents from BBC Television News who proved themselves good at communicating in the required style of the bulletin. In addition to this, like other news and current affairs programmes, Newsround was supplied with news items from the Newsroom throughout the day. These came from a number of wire services and the General News Service, or GNS, which distributed 'rip and read' bulletins throughout the BBC every hour. The summaries were supplemented by news over the tannoy whenever an important item was received by the Newsroom.

Besides this direct dependence on the resources of the Newsroom, observation of the programme revealed a routine that paralleled the news routines outlined by Schlesinger. Generally accepted sources of news structured the bulletin from the outset, when the first person to arrive in the Newsround office, at nine, an assistant producer acting as

planner and copytaster, was armed with summaries of television and radio news and the daily press. At the programme meeting at ten, a 'list of prospects' was drawn up, some two stories being allotted to each assistant producer, who had until one forty-five to research these stories. A second meeting allowed the producer to draw up the running order, reflecting a 'balance' between 'hard news' and items of 'special interest to children.'(4) A lack of suitable 'hard news' often caused the programme makers to turn to other news sources, including the film library at Brentford, and various news agencies, organisations and pressure groups. Some of these agencies were more prolific and efficient in their distribution of material than others, and the frequent inclusion of items on the Royal Family and conservation owed something to the efficiency of public relations at the Palace and of ecology organisations respectively.

Videotapes were edited throughout the afternoon and very occasionally items would be changed at the last minute because of late news. The general mood of the programme was one of increasing activity, reaching a climax in the half hour before the programme was due to go out. Depending on whether or not last minute problems had arisen, there was sometimes time for a brief rehearsal of some of the presenter's links in the half

hour's studio time before the programme began. In the studio, the studio director and assistants assumed responsibility for the actual transmission of the programme, but the producer was also present and he or she retained overall responsibility, supervising last minute alterations during the broadcast, which were relayed to the presenter via the floor manager.

Schlesinger wrote of television news that

"There are ... systematic links between the newsman's time perspective and the demands created by the organisation of work. The newsman's emphatic bias towards immediacy though, is more than just a response to market conditions. It is a form of fetishism in which to be obsessed about time is to be professional in a way which newsmen have made particularly their own." (5)

Newsround's routine, and its reliance on BBC News, limited the extent to which Newsround could differ to any major extent from adult bulletins in terms of organisation.

2) Children's Television

The second set of values concerned Newsround's place as an integral part of children's television, reflected in scheduling and billing in the Radio Times and on children's television itself. The bulletin fell within the viewing patterns of the many children who watched television from the time they came in from school until the end of children's broadcasting: five forty on BBC1

at the time the study took place. There was evidence that the short duration of Newsround between other popular programmes resulted in its being seen by nearly all the children interviewed at least once a week, even allowing for alternative viewing on other channels.

Written programme aims referred to the fact that children had special interests and needs that justified a news bulletin aimed specifically at them. There were two main strands to this conception of the child viewer: firstly, that children should be led to develop an interest in news, which was not, in general, interesting to them. News should, it was said, be supplemented by items of particular interest to children, while the main news of the day should be re-presented in a way that would make it comprehensible and interesting to them. To quote Edward Barnes, involved in establishing Newsround and now Head of Children's Programmes,

"Our aims were to provide an entertaining news bulletin with items which are of interest to children. It must, of course, carry important world events like the refugee problems in Bangladesh and the plight of the thalidomide children. But there must also be room for the lost kangaroo in Chicago, the world's biggest pumpkin and the car powered by pig dung. Unlike adult news, we are not bound to cover stories like trade union and party political conferences which bore children because they are outside their experience, but strong stories like famine in Bangladesh and war in Kurdistan have far more coverage on John Craven's Newsround than on adult news. The great strength of John Craven's Newsround is that we are not hedged in by adult news values. Our only criteria are: is it news and will it interest children without distressing them."(6)

One of Newsround's past editors, Jill Reach, stressed the same goal, of greater diversity than adult news, in her statement on Newsround. She wrote,

"We have two main aims. Firstly, to put out stories of particular interest to children, stories that they would probably see nowhere else. For instance, we do a lot about schools. And news items about pocket money or proposed changes in children's working conditions are major industrial stories for us. We are also strong on human interest, space, science, animals and sport. Our other main aim is to put across the main news of the day in a way that makes it interesting and intelligible to children. On 'foreign' stories, like Rhodesia, we put out pieces which fill in the background to the day's news. We also have special reports from the BBC's correspondents world wide, angled to interest our audience ... but whatever the category the story falls into, the most important thing is that it should be well put across. We don't want our reporters to talk down as if they're trying to explain the news." (7)

Secondly, as suggested in the quotation from Edward Barnes above, it was assumed that children might find certain items of news disturbing and that these should be treated so as to allay fears and anxieties. An internal BBC publication on children's television stressed this aspect of Newsround.

"It was in order to help children understand and come to terms with some of the more horrifying incidents that they see in news film shown in late evening bulletins that the Children's Programmes Department decided to start John Craven's Newsround ... This programme cannot - and some people would say ought not to - pretend that disasters never happen, but much thought is given to the choice of illustrative material and commentary. Similarly, great care is taken to try to avoid any undue emphasis on violence in children's programmes as a whole." (8)

The aim of protecting children from unsuitable material was reinforced by criticism and comment on children's television in general outside the broadcasting institutions, from Mary Whitehouse and the National Viewers and Listeners Association, to teachers and parents who contributed to written and verbal statements in in-house journals such as The Listener and broadcast discussions on the dangers of televised violence for children.

This second area, of violence as potentially frightening and traumatic, seemed, to judge from various comments and the small number of complaints, to have been satisfactorily handled in Newsround. While it was confirmed by the broadcasters that some parents telephoned or wrote to the Newsround office after specific items that they felt had transgressed a generally accepted norm, most comments on Newsround by the parents interviewed for the research stressed that Newsround was, in their view, doing a better job than adult news in presenting violent events in an acceptable way. Experience of producing the programme, dealing with the criticisms of individual parents and engaging in the debate on televised violence seemed to have fed into the experience of the broadcasters, giving them a 'common sense' sensitivity to what would, and would not, be acceptable to the majority of children viewing, or at least to the parents and others likely to protest. Comments made in the aftermath of the Falklands

conflict in 1982, restated that Newsround had tried to avoid showing scenes that might upset children, the editor of Newsround writing in *The Listener* of 4th November 1982 that members of one serviceman's family had told him that they chose to watch Newsround rather than adult news during the conflict, in the knowledge that, should there be bad news, "then Newsround would break it gently."

Nevertheless, the very fact that the programme makers found it necessary to restate this explicitly, related in part to suggestions concerning the riots the previous year, when it was said by some that news coverage might not only have frightened children but encouraged them onto the streets in imitation of what they had seen. There was thus in this debate a conflation of two possible effects of television violence: fear and imitation, in which the latter seemed to have been the main cause for concern during the riots. In fact, the possibility of imitation related rather to children's involvement and interest in the news, outlined earlier, and to attempts to render the news more interesting, outlined below.

3) Values Concerning 'Good Television'

The presentation of Newsround resembled adult news, with a newscaster seated at a desk, introducing and linking the different items and, in Newsround, providing the

voice over many of the filmed items as well, since the programme had fewer contributions from reporters and correspondents than adult bulletins. It was found, during the research, that because the style of Newsround conformed to children's experience and expectations of adult bulletins, their interest and attention waned during the bulletins. As Lewis has described in a study of narrative forms and news presentation (9) efforts were made to counteract the potentially uninteresting nature of news in Newsround and good film, for example, often led to an item being placed high in the running order, on the assumption that this would be likely to hook and retain audience attention.

This, however, led to potential problems where children's news was concerned, since visuals and graphics were often provided by departments not directly connected with Newsround and time constraints occasionally prevented thorough vetting of the visuals requested before the programme was transmitted. There was thus a danger that inclusion of 'exciting' film might contravene the goal of protecting children from disturbing coverage of violent events and, during the riots, in the process of trying to ensure an attentive audience for news, the programme makers ran the risk of creating an active audience, since the events portrayed featured young people, with whom the audience might identify.

During the riots there was thus a problem of how far the broadcasters could go to interest children without causing them to get actively involved. The broadcasters accepted that involvement was a desirable goal in certain areas such as conservation and the plight of the Third World. Unfortunately, though, it was more likely that involvement would be achieved in an area 'closer to home' both literally and metaphorically.

During interviews, broadcasters would often defend their practice against criticism from individual parents and other adults on the grounds of their experience which entitled them to speak for the children they served, so that the 'children' functioned as a type of 'silent majority.' While many writers on television and children have criticised the rigid, universal concepts of children and childhood prevalent among some practitioners in mass communications (10), it was not so much the rigidity of the Newsround broadcasters' notion of children, but its location in practical experience and 'common sense' which made it difficult to extrapolate, define and examine. The concept appeared to be sound as far as children's tolerance of violence was concerned but less sound in its estimate of the nature and degree of children's interest in politics, in a broad sense. The somewhat limited view of the audience also related, implicitly, to an 'effects' model of mass communications and caused the broadcasters to concentrate too much on the production of news and too

little on other factors that might have influenced audience response during the riots. This problem will be reconsidered in considering audience response in Section III.

II Programme Style and Content

Style and content of Newsround were examined in comparison with the adult news bulletin that followed children's programmes on BBC1 during the period of study, the Early Evening News, so that the programme makers' goals concerning the specifics of children's news could be evaluated.

1) Programme Style - Presentation

The most important difference in style between Newsround and the adult bulletin concerned Newsround's use of one presenter to cover most of the material. John Craven, or his deputy Paul McDowell, linked the items and presented sixty-six per cent of the reports over film, these reports being written by the presenters or drafted by scriptwriters. This presentation was intended to provide familiar figures who would become associated with news and current affairs and reassure children during coverage of complex, violent and frightening events. Thus Newsround's presenters fulfilled the roles of newscasters plus those of the various correspondents and reporters who spoke directly to the camera on adult news.

In the thirty-four per cent of Newsround items presented by other Newsround staff, or reporters from BBC News, only Reginald Turnill was described as Newsround's 'Space Correspondent': Newsround claimed no other such 'expertise.' Correspondents from BBC News occasionally provided background for foreign items, or long running issues such as unemployment, but in general Newsround reports were not those of specifically designated 'experts.'

Length of Item

On average, Newsround carried between five and six items per bulletin. Since each bulletin lasted for an average of seven minutes, the average item was between one and two minutes long, although major stories and items providing background tended to last longer and occasionally one item dominated the whole bulletin. The Early Evening News carried an average of thirteen items during its twenty minute broadcast and this meant that each item also lasted between one and two minutes. The task for Newsround, therefore, was not to condense items into a shorter slot, but to select which items to cover in the shorter bulletin, and to present them in a way that made them comprehensible and interesting to the audience.

Opening and Closing Items

Both Newsround and the Early Evening News began their bulletins with music over which the presenter summarised the first item. In contrast with adult news, which went on to give the main 'headlines', Newsround continued with the first item, so that the 'end' of each story was not pre-empted. Although an average of three Newsround items per bulletin were also covered in the Early Evening News, the lead item was the same in both bulletins in only twenty-seven per cent of the broadcasts. Besides items on the Royal Family, repetition of lead items involved coverage of major disasters: the Falklands conflict, the IRA bombings in London on 20th July 1982 and the assassination attempts on Reagan, Sadat and the Pope. With the exception of these areas, Newsround led with items on conservation, science or wildlife, which resulted in adult news items being sandwiched between 'children's news' and, thus, in a different shape for most Newsround bulletins. If one includes sport under the category of 'light' items, excluding, of course, items on sport and politics, such as South African cricket and rugby tours, just under eighty per cent of both bulletins ended with 'light' items.

Use of Visuals

Both Newsround and the Early Evening News aimed to provide a relevant inset still or colour separation overlay, CSO, as the presenter introduced each item. Symbols were used less frequently in Newsround, since children were considered less likely to connect symbols with the relevant news items. Figures and graphs, too, were rarely used on Newsround. Exceptions included maps, occasional use of figures on unemployment and, more frequently, animated diagrams concerning science and space stories, such as the projected orbits of the American space shuttle. Since Newsround carried fewer industrial items than the Early Evening News however, it could be argued that it was the content of children's news that precluded heavy use of figures and diagrams rather than any specific policy in this respect.

To summarise, it could be said that Newsround was, in most major respects, the same as adult bulletins. It differed in overall length but not length of item and over the selection of most lead items, but had a general shape that moved from 'heavy' to 'light' items. While Newsround had fewer 'experts', symbols, graphics and technical jargon, the general format of newscaster presenting and linking stories gave the programme the appearance of 'news.'

2) Programme Content

To study content, categories were drawn up for children's news and these categories were used to study the adult bulletins, so that it was possible to compare the latter with Newsround. Three of the general categories were subdivided, and a comparison of these sub-categories is given on the block diagram that follows the pie charts.

The pie charts depict the general structure of the two news bulletins. They show that foreign news, sport, the Falklands conflict and minor categories like the media had a roughly equal share of coverage on both bulletins. A far larger proportion of adult news was taken up with domestic items, while coverage of the environment, space, exploration and science scarcely figured on adult news.

From the bar chart that follows, it can be seen that the pattern of foreign news is roughly similar in both bulletins, although Newsround gave more space to the Third World and the Eastern Bloc than adult news. In domestic news, the largest share belonged to the public sector in both bulletins, although the majority of these items dealt with education in Newsround, as suggested by Jill Reach in the statement cited earlier, while the spread of items was greater on adult news. Items on the private sector and the economy in general were numerous in the

Early Evening News, including daily coverage of the value of sterling and the Financial Times Share Index. law and order, Northern Ireland and party politics also had heavier coverage on adult bulletins and these categories accounted for the higher proportion of domestic news items.

There were major differences between the two bulletins concerning the number of animal stories in Newsround, nearly ten per cent as compared with one per cent on the Early Evening News, and the larger proportion of environment science and technology items on Newsround, but there was little significant difference between the separate categories of children and the media.

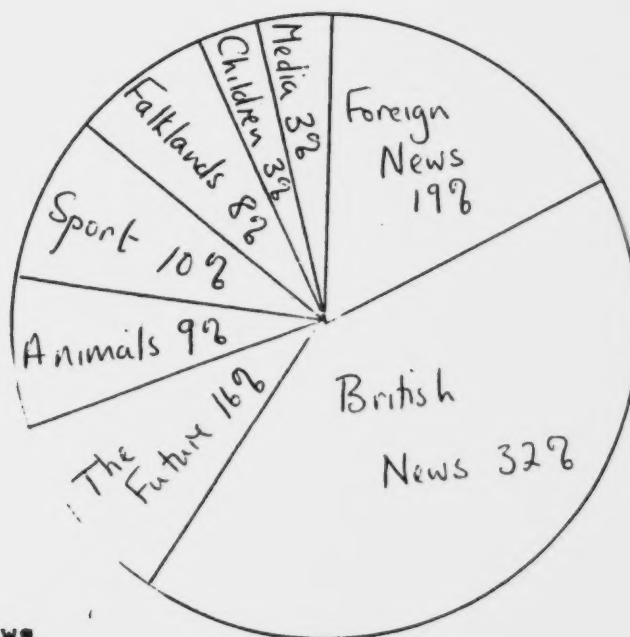
The general impression gained from a content analysis of Newsround was one expressing concern over global problems such as famine, conservation and the direction of scientific and technological developments. The overall impression of the adult bulletin was of an overriding concern with the domestic economy and law and order on the British mainland and Northern Ireland. It might be said that the world of adult news was an insecure, troubled and dangerous one, with events in Britain at the centre of concern; while the world of Newsround was more forward looking, safer and less concerned with short term domestic issues than with long term global ones. These two views are not, of course, mutually exclusive, or incompatible,

but they say a great deal about what was regarded as the proper province of children's 'political' interest.

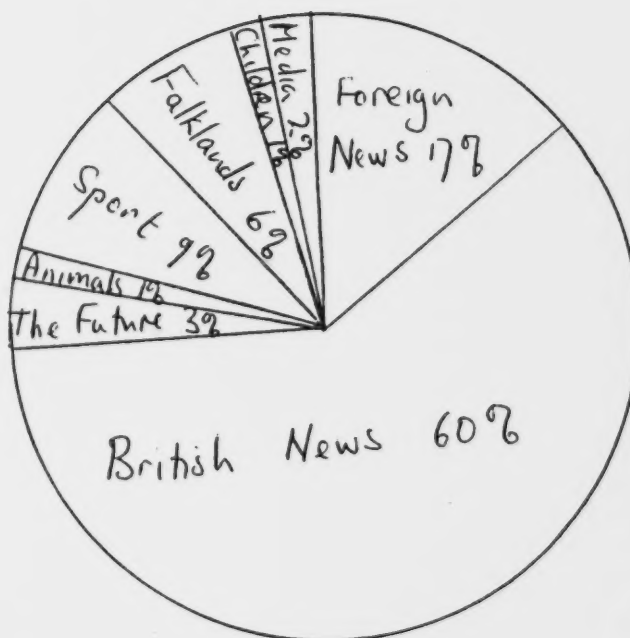
Consideration of the implications of Newsround content again made it necessary to question the essentially pragmatic approach of the broadcasters. Of the three traditional aims of broadcasting: information, entertainment and education, the programme makers - probably because of the negative connotations of formal, school education for 'entertainment' - accepted as their brief only the first two, thereby avoiding responsibility for, and conscious examination of, the educative potential of the programme. Items from the Newsroom, or other news sources, were included because of shared definitions of what constituted 'hard news', or because of the need to produce a regular bulletin in a given time, in the face of a lack of obviously important events. The gap in thinking and writing in this area meant that no internal consideration was given, at the time, to the 'educational' connotations and relative merits of repetition, modes of address, narrative device, role models and visuals, all of which would have been relevant in assessing the effectiveness of the bulletin in terms of gaining and holding children's interest.

Diagram to show general breakdown of content of bulletins monitored.

Newsround

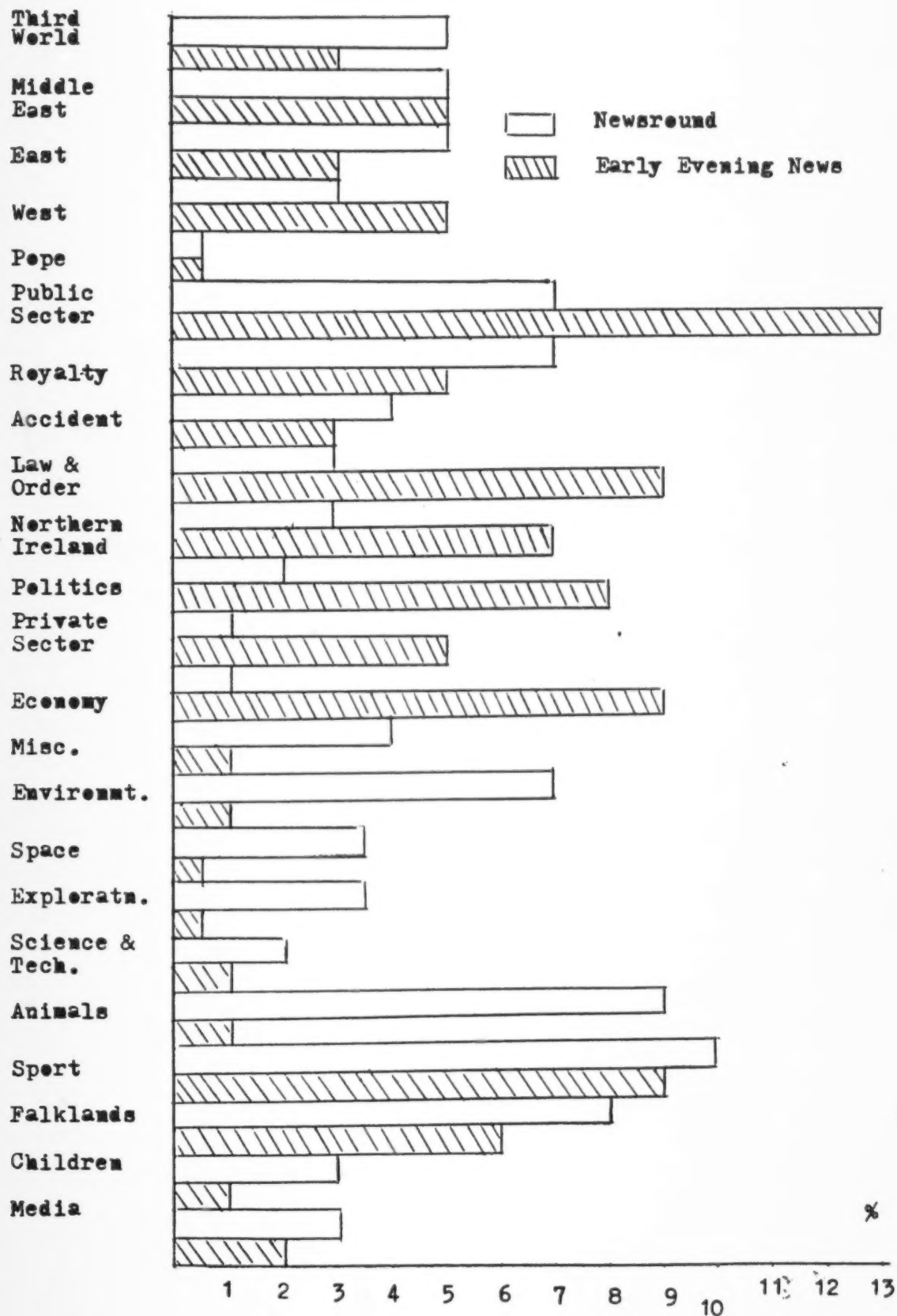


Early Evening News



Detailed breakdown of bulletins monitored

Items



III The Audience

The Interviews

For the third area of the process of communication, responses to children's television news were obtained during informal, unstructured interviews with small groups of children aged between eight and eleven, the target age range for Newsround as defined by the broadcasters. (11) Third year primary and second year middle school children from fifteen London schools were interviewed, this generally taking place in groups of five or six children, irrespective of ability, including roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. Six of the schools were visited twice, to see how far responses varied between the beginning and end of the school year in question. To control for the effect of school environment on children's responses, ten families were interviewed in their homes and, at one of the schools, mothers and children were interviewed together for part of the session.

While the interviews had no set format, they all began with discussion of viewing habits and preferences and moved on to a discussion of news and politics, using 'politics' in the broad sense employed by Crick, Lister and others involved in the debate on the teaching of politics in secondary schools: that is, knowledge of, and ability in the practice of, decision making, allocation

of resources, deciding priorities and recognising the limits on participation in all social situations. (12)

General Viewing Routines

As Cullingford found in research undertaken at about the same time, children watched television extensively. (13) Most of them would begin when they arrived home from school and continue until about six, when they would break for tea or supper, and resume watching 'grown-ups' television until they went to bed. Bed-times ranged from eight-thirty for some children at the lower end of the age range, to nine-thirty for older children, but many children had no set bed-time and nearly all were allowed to stay up later on Fridays and Saturdays. Viewing routines were governed by family routines in general, parents' work, and other activities, and children did most of their viewing in front of the 'family' set in the main living room, in spite of widespread ownership of several sets. Few parents censored viewing, although some would express disapproval of certain adult programmes and discourage their being watched or make critical comments during the programmes.

The extent of children's viewing rendered them familiar with all the different forms of television, from situation comedy, soap opera and drama, to news

and current affairs. In the absence of direct experience, very little seemed to frighten children, from dramatised horror, which they generally enjoyed (14), to scenes of fighting and devastation on the news. Throughout the interviews, it was almost always the case that, rather than television coverage in itself, it was previous, or related, personal experience of violence or trauma that caused violent or traumatic scenes on television to trigger fear and anxiety in children's response.

Children disliked news and current affairs and often preferred adult to children's programmes, since they generally disliked anything patronising or 'good for them.' Thus, although many children might be present during the news, which most of their parents watched regularly, and most children watched Newsround, often because they were waiting for what followed, few were attentive viewers, their inability to remember news items contrasting with their remarkable ability to remember advertisements, cartoons and comedy scripts, often verbatim.(15) One particular programme reflected the importance of drama, and characters and situations to which children could relate, in children's viewing. While it was sometimes difficult to elicit any comments on the news over the period of interviewing, comments

on the BBC 1 children's drama series, Grange Hill, arose spontaneously at all the interviews, and it was noteworthy that the only two specific cases of individual children imitating incidents seen on television, cited in each case by the Head Teacher of a school visited, involved activities seen on Grange Hill.

News Viewing

Bearing in mind children's general lack of interest in the news, the exceptions to this lack of interest over the period were significant: namely, coverage of the riots of July 1981 and the Falklands conflict. Children's responses to coverage of the Falklands conflict reflected this interest, but, probably more because of the distance at which events were taking place than the nature of presentation on children's news, evoked no anxiety amongst the children interviewed, many of whom watched adult coverage of the conflict as well.

Int: Are you interested in the Falklands?

Nathan: I suppose we really have to be. It's our country, and so we have to be.

Int: And if you didn't have to be, would you?

Children: Yes. Definitely. Anyway.

Diana: 'Cause it's my country - our country - and we're in it.

Kenton 6.5.82

blamed for failing to keep them out of trouble. Secondly, descriptions of the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland received parallel coverage and, on two occasions, placed next to coverage of the riots and police measures to deal with the trouble. Thirdly, it was possible that the broadcasters' efforts to include film of the riots introduced visual material that transcended the sober verbal commentary of those called upon to give their views, including Liberal M.P. for Texteth, David Alton, Margaret Thatcher, Home Secretary William Whitelaw, the Roman Catholic and Anglican bishops of Liverpool, Prince Charles and Chief Constable Anderton of Manchester. As stated earlier, film was provided by departments not directly connected with children's television, while lack of time often led to insufficient vetting and, finally, lack of internal consideration of the form of television news meant that there was, at the time, no internal assessment of the power of film over verbal comment.

Audience Response to the Riots

Children interviewed in areas affected by the violence were not, in fact, enthusiastic about the possibility of joining in and imitating the violence but were the most anxious about what was taking place of all those interviewed. They also showed signs of

Int: Do you ever watch the news?

Geraldine: Oh yeah. Lots of news now. Since the Falklands was on, I watch the news.

Shane: I watch the news. First I watch John Craven's Newsround.

Int: Did you watch more, when the Falklands was on?

Duncan: When I got home, I'd turn on the news. There never was much news until the Falklands.

Int: Can you remember what was on the news before the Falklands?

Shane: Poland.

Duncan: The Pope was coming. The Falklands crisis was - you know - I couldn't wait to get home to hear the news.

Ilford 30.6.82

If the Falklands conflict could be seen, in some ways, as a 'media event' because of the distance at which the fighting was taking place, so general information on political issues and leaders, brought to most children solely via television, led to any interest in party politics reflecting what might be termed its 'entertainment value.' Comments would involve the appearance and style of leaders and Margaret Thatcher could not be mentioned, especially during the first sets of interviews, before the Falklands conflict, without children laughing and referring to her "schoolteacher" manner. In Telworth, she was called "bossy boots", in Twickenham a "rotter" and, on the second visit to Woolwich, a "horrible woman" who was "ugly." Children in Barnet actually mentioned Thatcher's "style" when asked what it was they disliked about her, adding that Michael Foot

offering a different reading of events from the one that eventually emerged on television, and this differed from accounts of children in unaffected areas. Two extracts from the taped interviews illustrate the way in which local experience influenced one set of responses, while the other was more influenced by media themes. Children in inner London drew almost entirely from their own experience in the following discussion.

Int: What's been happening on the news?

Lisa: Like - bombs.

Michael: Like - the riots. About the riots down Dalston.

Mark: And they're coming up our way as well.

Kikar: Y'know Brian? They lived right next door to it. His door - they was on the door.

Michael: Like the police - like the blacks and skinheads, they were fighting against the police.

Curtis: When the black people're walking down this road, the police just come and pick on them, for nothing. They suspect them. Just come and pick on them for nothing.

Mark: That's what starts it. Pakis tried to fight back - these skins.

Lisa: Shops are all boarded up because of it.

Hackney 15.7.81

The account of children without first hand evidence of rioting revealed a different perspective.

was no better, because he was too "scruffy." In Croydon, children said that they enjoyed "taking the micky out of Margaret Thatcher" who was "terrible" and "rubbish." In Romford, comments about the Conservatives and Thatcher included reference to her being "posh", which led to discussion of the Royal Family, which was also "posh." (16)

Comments on the possibility of nuclear war, too, often seemed more influenced by television drama and, sometimes, science fiction, than by any real perception of danger. The extract given below was typical of the continuing influence of film and drama about the Second World War on the pattern of children's response when questioned about war and international relations. Most children were, in fact, slightly more likely to cite Germany as Britain's main enemy than they were to name other countries like Russia.

Int: What do you think is the worst problem the world's got at the moment?

Christopher: Nuclear.

Int: Nuclear? What's that?

Zac: The Bomb.

Christopher: Well, weapons.

Int: Do you know what the weapons do? Say they dropped one here, how big an area ?

Zac: It would wipe out the whole country.

Christopher: About nearly all of Telwerth.

Barry: Atomic bomb. Atom bomb.

Daniel: The bouncing bomb. (Starts to hum The Dam Busters march.)

Int: What's that in, the bouncing bomb?

Daniel: The Dam Busters.

Int: That was another war, wasn't it? What war was that?

Christopher: World War Two.

Int: Who was fighting in it?

Christopher: Germany and England

Telwerth 22.10.81

Three points need to be made about children's response to 'hard news' and party politics. Firstly, in the absence of other major sources of information, it was inevitable that such issues as national politics or nuclear war would be seen and discussed in terms of the media. It is worth pointing out that primary and middle schools had, at the time, little formal work on these areas in the curriculum, but that where informal discussions, History and Social Studies lessons covered the areas, this was reflected in the comments of children interviewed in these schools and gave them supplementary, or alternative, knowledge, which enabled them to break out of media governed patterns of response.

Secondly, children's political comments may well have reflected their cynicism about their ability to

intervene in the political process. Obviously, most children were aware that without a vote there was nothing they could do to change those in power in national or local government, but they were also aware of a more general powerlessness, in the face of those who made decisions, especially when they had had experience of local administration and government.

Int: Say you get a local problem, can you do anything about it?

Trevar: The dustmen never come round our way.

Jasen: Well, the council don't do nothing about it like.

Trevar: They go, "You wait." They say, "Wait a minute."

Darren: Then you wait - twenty weeks - a year - know what I mean?

Trevar: Like we had blocked pipes, right? And it took them three days to come.

Darren: These kids, they broke our window and my mum 'phoned the council. And that was last year and they haven't come yet!

Hackney 15.7.81

At times, this recognition of powerlessness combined with a sense of injustice to produce a reflection on democracy in a much broader sense.

Paul: They think they can do what they like.

Suzanne: They think they can do everything - like Maggie Thatcher.

Danny: But she doesn't own us.

Twickenham 13.7.81

Charlotte: People who are poorer than others, they don't get a lot of say in the matter, 'cause, sort of, it's unfair. The richer people can get more say in every matter and they get all the privileges and everything, sort of. They (poor people) don't get enough say in the matter. They're just, sort of, dumped around, like.

Int: How about people locally, do they have any say?

Charlotte: I don't think so. They (the council) just talk to themselves.

Telworth 16.7.81

Thirdly, children's lack of interest in the news may reflect the nature of the news itself, with its need to produce a bulletin of a certain form and length daily, regardless of what was taking place in the world. The 1981 riots and the Falklands conflict showed that not all news was inherently boring to children and that, once their interest was aroused, children could exhibit considerable ability to think and judge for themselves.(17) The following discussion on the Falklands took up the question of objectivity on the news and showed children evaluating the concept in relation to a situation which they felt involved.

Int: Do you think the news is fair? In the Falklands crisis, is it fair to both sides?

Nathan: Sometimes they have to cheat. Like they say people have shot down an aeroplane

Dennis: And they haven't.

Nathan: They have it on the news ...

Int: Do you think the news ought to try to be fair? Do you think it should be on one side?

Timothy: Well, when there's a war on and they say something about the Falklands, and

Nathan: I think - I suppose they're thinking that when dad, like, comes home from work and he wants to sit down and watch the news and know what's going on, he'll think, "What's this rubbish?"

Melissa: They've got to be careful. They can't be too looking at both sides because people might be thinking, "Why the Argentines? What right do they have? This must be Argentine news!"

Int: What do you think they could do about that? If you were working there, what would you do?

Melissa: They should say what the Argentines say but don't say it is - say "the Argentines think."

Kenton 6.5.82

In response to a similar question, some time later, when the fighting had ceased, Ilford children produced the opposite response, relating to the right of access to information and, by extension, to democracy, saying, "You've got to tell the news as it is. You can't really put one side or the other" and criticised Argentina, since, "the Argentines tell lies to their own people." Had the implications of these two statements been pursued, it is possible that further thoughts on the nature of democracy might have developed.

To summarise, children's response to television news was conditioned by viewing habits and by what children expected from a news bulletin: a break in the evening's

entertainment for something 'good for them' and, therefore, uninteresting. As suggested in the two previous sections, if the programme makers had considered the negative connotations of 'news' as well as 'education', they might have been led to reconsider the form of children's news. News could be interesting to children when they felt involved in events, either locally, during the riots, or nationally, during the Falklands conflict, just as issues that were political in a much broader sense, such as authority, democracy, employment and education were interesting to them when presented in dramatic form in Grange Hill, its offspring Tucker's Luck, featuring the adventures of an ex-Grange Hill boy after leaving school, or magazine programmes like Nationwide, which many of the children interviewed preferred to straight 'news.'

A consideration of the riots in greater detail will now show some of the specific problems raised in this instance, and consider other factors in the process of decoding news.

IV The Riots

As stated in the introduction, coverage of the riots was problematic for the makers of Newsround in that it involved violent events, and young people and social control. The fear of some broadcasters, and others, in the aftermath of the riots, was that their coverage had

actually encouraged children onto the streets, thus spreading the riots beyond their original base. In fact, the form of Newsround, combined with the emphasis on good visuals resulted in contradictions between visual and verbal content, while the juxtaposition of some items confused some of the children interviewed when they tried to describe and explain the riots. External factors created possibilities of decoding which bore some resemblance to the "penetrations" and "limitations" described by Willis in the culture of male school leavers as well as the class governed responses of adults outlined by Parkin and Merley. (18)

Responses to all television coverage, including news in general and the riots in this case, were influenced by factors relating to the material situation of the audience, from housing, which, in turn, influenced viewing as there could be little escape from the television without other rooms to go to, to the implications of parents' work and routines for control and comment on viewing, parents on shift work, for example, being absent from home in the evening. More far reaching, were the implications of material circumstances for language and education, described by Bernstein, Bordieu, Young and others (19) and for the 'political' experience derived from dealing with problems such as housing, unemployment and racism. All this meant that, for the most part,

children in the inner city areas most affected by the riots could have been expected to be the least likely to accept verbal commentary on the news, advising young people to stay away from troubled areas, and the least subject to the possibility of parental efforts to keep them off the streets. The responses of these children as they emerged in the interviews will be described after an outline of Newsround's coverage of the riots and some of the problems involved. The first bulletin will be given in detail, while the relevant comments in subsequent bulletins will be added briefly, to outline the direction of the themes raised.

Monday 6th July 1981

1st item Film of rioting, taken behind police lines. Riot shields evident. Switch from night riots to day time aerial view of damage.

"The British city scarred by two nights of rioting."

Theme music and 'Newsround' caption over film.

"Hello. Some of the worst violence ever seen on the streets of mainland Britain hit a part of one of our cities over the weekend."

Cut to Paul McDowell in the studio, against Newsround background for 'Monday.'
Section map showing Liverpool.

McDowell: William Whitelaw, "the Government Minister responsible for law and order" found the violence "unacceptable" and praised the police for their bravery during the riots.

Cut to film of violence, with fires, bottles and bricks being thrown, and much shouting.

McDowell: more than three hundred police from all over the North-West were called in, when rioters took to the streets on Saturday and Sunday. At times, the police lost control of the situation and retreated, eventually having to use CS gas, an irritating substance, which is extremely uncomfortable as it's breathed in, for the first time ever on the streets of mainland Britain. This use of CS gas was an indicator of how bad the trouble had become.

Cut to film of the following day.

McDowell: the firemen are trying to clear up the debris. Looters stole thousands of pounds worth of goods.

2 minutes 13 seconds

"Now the question everybody will be asking is why it happened in the first place."

Cut back to McDowell in the studio against CSO of a terrace of houses, with a high-rise block in the background.

McDowell: this is the third outbreak of violence in a poor area in less than eighteen months.

Map of Britain showing Bristol, with caption "April 1980"

Report on violence in Bristol.

Return to map of Britain, adding "London"

Report on violence in Brixton: 143 police were injured and damage was done to cars and property.

Return to map of Britain, adding "Liverpool."

McDowell: the violence in Tottenham was on a bigger scale. It's been called the worst rioting on Britain's streets in the last century.

46 seconds

Report over map: local community groups say that unemployment is the problem, combined with lack of facilities.

Cut to film of a child and some dogs, followed by shot of an area of waste ground, and a shot of a man and woman on the balcony of a block of flats.

Report continues: the trouble is not really between blacks and whites. Some people say the police pick on them and this adds to the tension.

Film of a small child sweeping open ground with a broom, followed by film of another child underneath the arch of a bridge, kicking a football against the side of the bridge.

Report: others say outsiders were to blame.

1 minute 15 seconds

"One man who spent much of the weekend in the area is the local M.P. David Alton."

Still of the Houses of Parliament.

Alton: I have seen shops and businesses attacked and old people pulled out of fires. You can only go away from that sort of scene feeling very, very ashamed of what's happening and very sad about it as well."

McDowell: that was David Alton M.P.

29 seconds

McDowell: no-one knows what will happen tonight. People in Texteth have been told to stay at home, while local community relations workers have appealed that the trouble be left to them to handle.

The whole item lasted 4 minutes 55 seconds

Tuesday 7th July 1981

3rd item CSO of street in Texteth
Craven: small groups have been out on the streets again in Texteth. Some of the rioters were as young as eight. Parents have been blamed.

Film of the rioting, apparently the same footage as the previous day.

Craven: more property has been destroyed. The Prime Minister is to find out why the riots took place.

Wednesday 8th July 1981

2nd item Fresh violence broke out in Northern Ireland after the death of the hunger striker Joe McDonald

3rd
item Riots took place in Moss Side in Manchester.
Film.

McDowell: the riots were not as bad as elsewhere.

Thursday 9th July 1981

2nd
item Craven: Young hooligans and vandals were out on the streets again last night. Prince Charles is to ask the police to help find a solution.

3rd
item Another hunger striker has died in Northern Ireland. Filmed report from Paul McDowell at wall dividing the two communities in Belfast.

Monday 13th July 1981

1st
item "Mrs. Thatcher leaves for Texteth."
Music

McDowell: Mrs. Thatcher says that the police must be helped. A tomato was thrown at the Prime Minister while she visited the troubled areas. Security was tight for the visit, during which the two Bishops of Liverpool will be consulted. A cabinet meeting has suggested big spending programme to cope with the violence.

CSO rioting

McDowell: Meanwhile, stopping the violence is the first priority. Riots have taken place in Leicester and Leeds during the weekend.

Map. Film of riots.

McDowell: Sentences have been passed on forty six schoolchildren, ranging from three to nine months. A thirty seven year old man from Stockport was fined. Jim Jardine, Head of the Police Federation wants action against the rioters.

Still of Jardine.

Wednesday 15th July 1981

2nd
item Craven: The Minister responsible for law and order in Britain has outlined his measures for riot control.

Army camps will be used to detain rioters. Water cannon will be used in extremem circumstances.

Film of water cannon.

Craven: some say the police will lose support because of these measures: others say the measures are necessary.

Thursday 16th July 1981

2nd item Craven: The marathon debate on the riots in the House of Commons has begun.

Still of William Whitelaw.

Craven: There has been more trouble in Brixton, following a police raid causing damage to houses in Railton Road. Home Office officials have visited the area but made no comment.

Film of Brixton.

"Another important visitor to Brixton was Lord Scarman, investigating trouble earlier in the year."

Still of Scarman.

Craven: M.P.s want to know how to stop the violence. The debate is expected to last until midnight and shows how serious the trouble has become.

There were three significant features to note relating to this coverage. Firstly, although the first bulletin of Newsround during the riots, on Monday 6th July, actually presented a number of possible causes for the trouble, including community police relations, unemployment and poor conditions in Britain's inner cities, as the week went on reference was increasingly made to the youth of the rioters, whose parents were

Int: Tell me about the riots. What happened?

Jane: The skinheads.

Terry: The police are getting bombarded by eight year olds.

Robert: Everybody - skinheads -

Claire: It was mainly in Ireland, but now it's brought over. Especially at Brixton.

Jane: Shops -

Terry: Yeah.

Claire: And I think the police shouldn't put as many advertisements - not exactly advertisements but so many, sort of, clips, from them, 'cause it just encourages the younger children.

Terry: Five year olds watch it. Five year olds grow up with it so they think it's right to fight against the police and start chucking bricks at them.

Jonathan: The skinheads said they didn't do anything, but they do. They start quite a lot about it.

Robert: They throw petrol bombs and that.

Jane: Shops were set on fire.

Telwerth 16.7.81

In both cases, the particular concerns of individual children were brought out in the victims or perpetrators they named, often in single words, and in the areas mentioned, in all cases close to where the children lived. The mention of "skinheads" more than once, in both schools, was interesting, since "skinheads" were not

given in television news at any time as an agent in this particular trouble. Skinheads had been cited in racial violence which took place in Southall the previous weekend, which was not linked with the riots by the media, race being explicitly discounted in the first Newsround bulletin, although reference to Bristol and Brixton implicitly reintroduced the theme, since race had been a factor on both these occasions. However, skinheads' identification with trouble was probably more general and, for this reason, more powerful amongst these children.

The most interesting feature in the responses was the way in which the local experience of the Hackney children led them towards one view of the riots, while the Telworth children, without direct experience of the riots, viewed them as a problem of 'children versus police', linking and confusing other organisations denoting trouble, including the events in Northern Ireland in their version of events.

It thus seemed that the primary theme of television news, including Newsround, during the two weeks' coverage was reflected in the comments of these children with no first hand evidence of the riots. While all the children condemned the violence, children from an area involved

in the riots offered a consistent account of why people had rioted on the basis of local knowledge and experience, suggesting that those who did so were influenced not by television coverage but by community police relations.

V Conclusions

While Newsround was found over the period of study to have fulfilled its own written aims concerning the type of content, presentation of issues so as not to frighten children and, moreover, to have been unlikely to have led children to imitate the violence shown during the riots, all these findings bear upon the fact that, like other news bulletins, Newsround was primarily a form of television entertainment rather than a source of political socialisation. This was more apparent when the broadcasters' routine efforts to secure an attentive audience coincided with events which might have included the audience and the broadcasters had to face the possible consequences of coverage which might have led children onto the streets. The limitations of form and presentation of news were generally too tight to allow sufficient consideration of all aspects of children, politics and education, at the time the research took place.

The 1983 DES Report, 'Popular Television and Schoolchildren' (20) stressed the value of 'entertainment' in children's viewing. The interaction of entertainment with information and education, and the implications of this interaction for teachers involved in Media Studies and New Social Studies in primary schools, broadcasters and media sociologists were underlined in this research. There is a need for further study of children's television, particularly of the drama and other programmes cited by children themselves as interesting, in order to explore the contradictions, links and themes that develop over a range of programmes, the possibility of "opening" areas that remain "closed" in the news and of raising issues that are 'political' in a broad sense. (21) This would provide more evidence on the value of visuals, scheduling, drama, role models, repetition and relevance cited in discussing programme content. Since the research was completed, developments in Grange Hill such as coverage of drug abuse, and the programme It's Not Just Zanne, broadcast in front of a live studio audience after Grange Hill on 1st April 1986, presented by John Craven and Nationwide presenter Nick Ross and featuring members of the Grange Hill cast, suggest that these areas are now being

considered in Children's Television. Such consideration could be extended, and linked with what is taking place in schools, so as to draw on the knowledge and experience of broadcasting and education respectively.

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